"I am a great believer in people speaking for themselves... Too much is written from the outside looking in, and far from enough is written from the inside looking out. Especially is this true about the peoples of Asia." —Pearl S. Buck

Pearl S. Buck, *Pavilion of Women*, and Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Feminism

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I. The Problem of Pearl S. Buck

Since Peter Conn's 1996 biography of Pearl S. Buck, a modest revival of interest in her work has taken place, often led by scholars with connections to China.[1] Yet, academic examinations of her writing tend to bemoan how little she is discussed today. My version of this lament follows a familiar pattern: despite being one of only two American women to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, writing one of the best-selling books of the twentieth century, and founding several organizations dedicated to cross-cultural exchange and interracial adoption, Buck's legacy has had a hard time of it, with *The Good Earth* being her only novel that is still regularly read. In *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*, Conn writes, "I knew that [she] had won the Nobel Prize for literature... and I had traveled long enough in advanced literary circles to know that Buck's prize was not at all respectable" (*Cultural Biography* xi). Later, he delves into the factors for the diminishment of her literary reputation, noting that she did not much resemble the kind of writer drafted into the reading lists of the 1950s and 60s: "To begin with, her principal subjects were women and China, both of which were regarded as peripheral

and even frivolous in the early postwar years" (xvii). Her work found a popular audience on its own, rather than being promoted by critics and scholars, earning her the dreaded appellation "middlebrow," and, as Conn notes, she probably published too much for her own good. To these issues, we might add that for readers in the twenty-first century there is something uncomfortable about Buck. She is, after all, a white woman, the child of colonial-era missionaries and, later, an employee of the missionary board herself, whose work shaped the image of China in the American imagination for several generations. Thus, perhaps it is not surprising that examinations of her work tend to see her writing either as a site of genuinely productive cross-cultural exchange[2] or as merely one more example of Orientalist literature.

Indeed, in *Embracing the West: White Women and American Orientalism* Mari Yoshihara identifies the techniques Buck used to mask *The Good Earth's* Orientalist bent: erasing her subjectivity by telling the novel from a third-person point of view that doesn't make clear "the author's racial or gender identity," shying away from geographic and historic specificity, and infantilizing her Chinese characters through short sentences and diction literally translated into English (154-6). Yoshihara reads these aspects of the book's prose, which is characteristic of Buck's writing, as associating the text with objective anthropologic discourse, an academic discipline that came to prominence in the decade before the book's 1931 publication. But if we acknowledge that the kind of close third-person narration found in *The Good Earth*—which "avoids judgment from a Western perspective" (154)—was pervasive in fiction long before anthropologists sought to demonstrate the scientific nature of their discipline, we might see cracks in Yoshihara's other claims as well. For instance, Buck's tendency to leave historical events unnamed in *The Good Earth* and her other novels does not necessarily transform the land and her characters into "static, ahistorical objects, turning the tale into a sort of allegory that generates another—more 'universal'—level of meaning" (155); the presence of foreigners in the novel's urban scenes, the use of opium in the wealthy House

of Hwang, and the building of railroads all indicate a specific period of Chinese history. And though Yoshihara points to Wang Lung as a depiction of "an ignorant farmer who does not comprehend the social changes taking place around him" (155), we might just as easily see his characterization as indicative of Buck's belief that "the reality of China was better found in the country's villages and colloquial tales than in imperial palaces" (*Cultural Biography* 201). Finally, while Yoshihara sees Buck's stripped-down prose as infantilizing her characters, Conn understands this "formal, quasi-biblical rhetoric" as lending the characters' lives a degree of dignity (131). He also remarks that Buck was influenced by Chinese classics, which she read and translated, and she said she mentally composed her novels in Chinese and that her stilted prose was a result of trying to reproduce Chinese cadences in English (113, 139). A contemporary reader can find passages to support either Yoshihara or Conn's reading, and the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. On the whole, what is more convincing than Yoshihara's claims about *The Good Earth* is her broader thesis about Buck's use of ethnographic detail and her role as a popular expert on China.

Certainly, whether Buck was cognizant of it or not, through her Chinese novels she entered into a tradition Edward Said so powerfully identified in *Orientalism*:

> Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient *affiliates* itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. (20; emphasis original)

But unlike the writers Said directs his thesis at, Buck had grown up in China, was raised bilingual, playing with Chinese children, and following her amah through the streets of Chinkiang (*Cultural Biography* 21, 23-4). The circumstances of Buck's life were determined by attitudes of Western superiority, as embodied in the missionary activities that both her parents were engaged in. However, Buck herself

was a more complicated figure, who eventually came to denounce evangelicalism and resigned from the Presbyterian Mission Board after publically questioning the value of missionary work (*Cultural Biography* 154). Part of Yoshihara's project is to update our understanding of Orientalism to account for an author like Buck and to examine how Orientalist discourse was adapted by American intellectuals as a result of America's growing power in East Asia. Thus, although Buck was not "outside the Orient, both as an existential and moral fact" (Said 21), it was impossible for her to escape the patterns of thought that governed relations between the East and West—including, of course, the very idea of dividing the world into East and West, of producing of two imagined geographies with populations assigned pre-determined sensual, moral, and racial characteristics.[3] Thus, for Buck "ethnographic knowledge and its textual display" (Yoshihara 153) might have been part of an attempt to tell a story grounded in Chinese realities and tear down the stereotypes and outright lies of an earlier Orientalism in the process; but for readers, such ethnographic detail established her as an American Oriental expert. As Yoshihara argues, this allowed Buck to become a popular expert on China, a role she assumed with ease because of what Karen Leong identifies as the "structuring absence" of Chinese or Chinese-Americans in discussions about Asia (51). Buck wrote prolifically and it is difficult to generalize about her work, but a starting point is to acknowledge both the inherent Orientalism in her oeuvre, and the fact that her experience allowed her to craft depictions of Asia that were not *merely* Orientalist.

Engaging with Buck's work on these terms, there is value to be found in her fiction, which can open conversations about early twentieth-century China. In fact, Conn observes that many Chinese scholars regard her novels as a valuable kind of history, a "treasure trove" in the words of Liu Haiping (xix). I am especially interested in how, examining her 1946 novel *Pavilion of Women* through recent scholarship on gender in China, we can see that the book reflects the different conceptions of female subjectivity that existed simultaneously at the time of the

Second Sino-Japanese War[4] and puts forth its own progressive idea of gender. By presenting this imaginary of heterogeneous feminisms, the book emphasizes that the understanding of who constitutes the group "women" is a question that is constantly up for debate and renegotiation.

II. Catachresis in *Pavilion of Women*

Even the subtitle, *A Novel of Life in the Women's Quarters*, encourages readers to think of the novel as an examination of a sexed subjectivity. However, as Tani E. Barlow points out in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, the terminology for sexes can be understood as what she calls, following Gayatari C. Spivak, catachresis, "a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent" (*Teaching Machine* 60).[5] Catachresis are similar to Raymond Williams' "key words," whose referents cannot be located in reality because there are "no 'true' examples of the 'true worker,' the 'true woman,' the 'true proletarian' who would actually stand for the ideals in the terms" (Spivak, "Practical Politics" 104). For a historian like Barlow, approaching "women," and the Chinese terms for female gender from this angle sidesteps anachronism by avoiding claims "about women's reality or women's experience across time, place, modes of production, social relations of production, cognitive mapping, [and] ideological conditions" (Barlow 16); to prevent the application of contemporary understandings of gender onto previous eras, one must refrain from assuming "women" is a stable category. This method for examining history might be applied to literary criticism, where the fictional nature of the text reinforces our resistance to the temptation to make assumptions about *what women must have been*. This will also allow us to focus on the way in which gender categories are contested and defined in Buck's novel.

Unlike *The Good Earth*, which chronicles the economic upheavals that allow Wang Lung to turn from impoverished farmer to wealthy landowner, *Pavilion of Women* takes shifting styles of womanhood as the primary marker

of China's "colonial modernity."[6] Moreover, Buck's portrait of a household containing characters embodying several drastically different modes of female being illustrates the way that modernity shattered the concept of "women." In this way the Republican era (1914-49) represented a moment of radical possibility, teeming with competing conceptions of "women" that were ultimately foreclosed by the success of the communist revolution.

Pavilion of Women uses the prosperous Wu family to present an image of life in rural China. The plot revolves around Madame Ailien Wu's attempts to liberate herself from the ever-present possibility of childbirth; on her fortieth birthday, she makes a bid for control over her reproductive capability by arranging a concubine for her husband. This plan is opposed by her friend Madame Kang, her sons and even her husband. Nevertheless, Madame Wu moves her rooms away from her husband's, takes in the peasant Ch'iuming to serve as her husband's "little wife," and attempts to settle the last of her obligations by arranging the marriage of her third son, Fengmo. However, the girl she has in mind, a daughter of Madame Kang, demands that her future husband have some foreign education. This compels Madame Wu to arrange an English tutor for him and brings the Wu family into contact with an excommunicated Catholic priest, Brother André. The drama of the second half of the novel comes about due to the intellectual awakening Madame Wu experiences as a result of Brother André's influence, as well as her decision to send her most ambitious son abroad and allow her daughter-in-law to help open a school for impoverished children. The unrest of the Wu household comes to a peak when Madame Wu's husband rejects the concubine she has selected for him, a "flower girl" from a local teahouse comes to live in his chambers, and Brother André is killed by a band of thieves, leaving Madame Wu to care for the orphans he had taken in.

The portrait of the novel's two main houses, Wu and Kang, likely has its roots in lived experience. In her 1952 autobiography, *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*, Buck wrote of her years in Suzhou, Anhui Province, where she

moved after marrying John Lossing Buck:

> [Madame Chang] lived just down our street, the matriarch of a large family, a tall and ample figure… Madame Chang was a jolly kind-hearted soul… There were no barriers between her and other human beings...
>
> My neighbor to the left, Madame Wu, was entirely different. She was a thin beautiful woman... and she ruled her big household with absolute authority… She too could not read, but... her father had taught her poetry. (*Several Worlds* 85)

In these real-life women, we can begin to see the outlines of the fictional Madame Kang and Madame Wu. The essences of Buck's neighbors are condensed in *Pavilion of Women*, with Madame Chang turning into Madame Kang, the husky, gregarious, simple-minded matriarch of an enormous, slovenly household.

The fictional Madame Wu, on the other hand, is made more modern. While Buck describes her neighbor as not being able to read, she notes that the matriarch had access to literary culture through the poetry her father had helped her memorize (*Several Worlds* 85). The fictional Madame Wu's father goes a step further, teaching his daughter how to read. Madame Wu's father-in-law later reinforces this literary tendency by giving her access to his library:

> Many times [her father-in-law] had even sent for her that he might read to her something from the old books in his library. She had learned to come to this library herself during his lifetime and read the books. Certain of these books had put aside as unfitting for a woman, and she had never touched them. (*Pavilion* 36-37)

Madame Wu's literacy associates her with historical generations of female elite in the Jiangnan region, to the east of Anhui Province, who constituted themselves as a gender, "women," through literary practices. Dorothy Ko writes about this in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China*, noting that in the last decades of the Ming period and the early-Qing period,[7] elite females in Jiangnan arranged *themselves* into a gender:

> The development of different forms of women's communities… signified the emergence of female gender as a category of social organization and self-identity. Through reading and writing women from different age groups and families formed an array of networks, ranging from the formal, lasting and visible to the private, transitory, and invisible. (292)

Female subjects self-identifying with the grouping women, rather than being merely "constituted as women in relation to men" (253), is significant and was accomplished through the literary practices Ko details, including writing, publishing, teaching, and corresponding through poetry and letters.

Notably, this gender was composed of courtesans, concubines, wives, and female kin from elite families, but did not extend to the lower classes, and thus was very different from conceptions that projected a universal female subject encompassing "all women." This construction of gender did not seek to challenge the patriarchal, Confucian social structure: "Voluntary bonds between women… [were not] one of the five cardinal relationships. On the other hand, the official ideologies never explicitly prohibited them as long as they did not interfere with the workings of male-centered structures" (Ko 292). While Ko's study examines this superliterate gender through the first decades of the eighteenth century, Susan Mann's *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* shows how female literacy continued and evolved in the Qing dynasty: "High Qing women writers built on and expanded the domain of learning and creative expression first developed by their seventeenth-century predecessors… [The trajectory of women's learning in late imperial China] appears to rise steadily from the late Ming onward" (7). Madame Wu, who would have been born at the tail end of Qing rule, seems to inherit this literary tradition. This is evident in the way that, after she announces her intention to bring a concubine into the household, she claims her late father-in-law's library for her own.

Thus it makes sense that in the early chapters of the novel, Madame Wu identifies as part of a female gender that is confined to elites and compliant with the

patriarchy. This is clear in the way she interacts with the non-elite females, such as the young woman she selects to take her place in her husband's bed: a peasant girl who will have to assume what could be called, after Michael Hardt, the affective labor of childbearing. Indeed, when Ch'iuming is brought to the household as a potential concubine, Madame Wu examines the young woman almost as if she was a "pound of pork," noting her "sweet and clean" breath and her "sound white" teeth, observing that under "the washed cotton coat and trousers, the girl's body was round and fat" (65, 200). Nowhere in these first interactions between Madame Wu and this young woman do we see the mutual identification that we see in the scenes between the protagonist and Madame Kang, a fellow elite who Madame Wu refers to as "sister" (8, 9, 97). Only after Ch'iuming acclimates to the household by sewing herself new garments to match Madame Wu's style and consummating her relationship to Mr. Wu, does Madame Wu begin to identify her as part of what Barlow calls "a women-as-same" gender. The inability to conceive of gender as a category that applies across social classes is even more starkly visible when Madame Wu visits one of her grandchildren in her eldest son's courts, where she encounters a wet nurse, Lien, who has been brought to the household from the countryside:

> [Meng's] breasts had been full of milk. But no one, not even she herself, had thought of allowing the baby to pull at her lovely small breasts and spoil their firmness. Lien had been hired to provide milk… Lien was allowed to go home once a month, and when she saw her child she wept and put him to her great breast. Her full nipples dripped milk, but the child turned away his head. He had never tasted milk and he did not know how to suckle. Lien could never stay out her day because of her aching breasts. By midafternoon she must hasten back to the Wu house… (17-8)

In this passage, we see the limitations of the conception of gender that Madame Wu holds at the beginning of the novel. While the nursemaid's story is told in narration, and it is not clear how much of this information Madame Wu is aware of, what is

clear is that she has no qualms about using non-elite females instrumentally for the sake of the patriarchal order. We might think of Madame Wu then, as an instance of the Confucian subject *funü*, a conception of gender incompatible with the universal female subjectivity that came to be associated with the conception of "women" in the twentieth century.

As Barlow notes, until the 1920s, the Confucian theoretical term *funü* had been the most common word for signifying female subjects.[8] This category encompassed female subjects as a group within the patrilineal family, where it signified the "collectivity of kinswomen… [within] Confucian family doctrine" (37). Referring to sinologist Mou Zhengyun's genealogy of the Chinese term for women, Barlow writes that the term *funü* was a result of the combination of the words *fu* (married women) and *nü* (unmarried woman), which had previously been separate words, but were combined to refer to all women in patrilineal families (40). In this conception, female subjects were constituted in relation to the patriline and labeled by their relationship to their fathers as daughters or their husbands as wives (though, as discussed above, through literary culture elite females expanded the internal possibilities of this gender while maintaining it as a category subordinate to the patriarchy). Hence, *funü* did not include women outside the family. Women were gendered by "virtue of the protocols specific to their subject positions and not necessarily or even in the first case by reference to the physiological ground they may or may not share with people outside the kinship group" (42). In Madame Wu, we see an instance of the kind of thinking produced by the gender *funü*, which renders non-elite females as something less than "women."

However, the narrative arc of *Pavilion of Women* presents several challenges to Madame Wu's conception of gender. One of these is Jasmine, a girl from the House of Peony Flowers who Mr. Wu brings into the household after rejecting Ch'iuming. Jasmine is described in terms of her lack of refinement and connection to nature. She is always perfuming herself with the scent of her namesake flower, and Mr. Wu sees her as a plump, "small round rollicking girl,"

while, for Madame Wu, she is "robust and earthy, coarse and passionate" (194). These descriptions of Jasmine are characteristic of *nüxing*,[9] a conception of women that appeared in the twentieth century and emphasized eugenic freedom. This idea of "women" was articulated by Chinese theorists, who were responding to intellectual currents from Europe, Japan, and the United States, especially the writings of Darwin. Barlow observes how theorists like Gao Xian used this new category to advanced what was, at the time, a progressive version of Chinese feminist thought:

> Theoretically speaking... if advanced societies acknowledged the natural tendencies inherent in the human species, they would "naturally" encourage females to be sexually assertive, because the determination of fitness in men rests with the intelligent—at least in evolutionary terms—desires of women. (80)

Gao's articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of *nüxing* is representative in its emphasis on eugenic freedom and the social evolutionary benefits of unrestrained female sexuality. In *Pavilion of Women*, Jasmine's association with the natural world mirrors the way that the catachresis *nüxing* and the progressive feminist discourse of the 1920s justified women's liberation through a Darwinian conception of nature and social evolution. The universal female subject *nüxing* was inextricably bound up with "an argument that makes sex the foundation of human life… the core of personality, and, to a rather, astounding degree, the ethical touchstone of human social behavior" (Barlow 83). Characteristically, Jasmine is drawn from the lower classes, having been a "wayside flower": an entertainer and prostitute in a brothel. Therefore, Madame Wu's eventual acceptance of Jasmine as Mr. Wu's "third wife," is indicative of an expansion in her thinking about gender to include all female subjects—a change that comes about as a result of her interactions with Brother André.

Another catachresis that signifies women and appears in Buck's novel (this time in the form of one of Madame Wu's daughters-in-law) is the female subject

who was the basis, in Maoist theory, for the Chinese household and, therefore, the state. Unlike *nüxing*, a neologism first found in translations of treaty port documents,[10] this third conception of "women" as gender was a repurposing of an earlier word by Chinese Marxists: the term *funü*. In a new context, the formerly Confucian signifier came to indicate female subjects within social production. This category represented resistance to *nüxing*'s Western, sexual, and erotic underpinnings, and a focus on thinking about women as a historical category. Rather than concentrating on female subjects' lack of agency in the selection of sexual partners, Marxists theorists like Xiang Jingyu[11] saw the "woman question" as part of the broader labor issue and perceived an antipathy between Marxists and progressive feminist intellectuals: "If the suffrage movement is successful then it simply means that a whole bunch of women will enter the pigsties of the capital and the provinces where, together with the male pigs, they can preside over... the people's misfortunes" (30). This new understanding of *funü* continued to evolve through the 1930s, as the Communist Party of China (CPC) undertook the Long March to Yan'an;[12] while the term had initially signified "women" in the sense of European Marxism's universal female proletariat, the increasingly Maoist CPC emphasized the role of *funü* in the various kinds of work that village women might undertake to mediate between the family and the state (Barlow 56). This included the realms of domestic labor, midwifery, education, women worker's councils, and other state bodies. For the Maoist state, the "the ideological ideal was a healthy, semiliterate woman of eighteen to thirty-five years old" whose work inside the jiating, or family "[mirrored] the work going on outside the jiating, in the guoji," or state (57, 59). The general understanding of *funü* continued to evolve alongside the CPC during the 1940s and 50s, becoming more statist and less tied to the family as Mao consolidated power.

In *Pavilion of Women*, we see the essence of this new understanding of *funü* in the character Rulan, whose entrance into the novel foregrounds her exposure to the Westernized fashions of Shanghai: "[Madame Wu] heard a

footstep. It was clear and decided, clacking on the stones lightly as it approached. She wondered for a moment—leather shoes? Who wore leather shoes among the women?… Then she knew. It was Rulan, the Shanghai wife of Tsemo, her second son" (43). The influence of the West is not only evident in Rulan's clothing, but also her political ideas, which are aligned with the progressive May Fourth Movement.[13] When she learns Madame Wu intends to bring a concubine into the household she protests, arguing this is against the law of the Revolutionary party:

> "Many of us worked hard to abolish concubinage… We marched in procession in the Shanghai streets in hottest summer... I myself carried a blue banner that bore in white letters the words, 'Down with concubines.' Now when someone in my own family... does a thing so old-fashioned, so—so wicked." (46)

Rulan initially espouses many of the ideas associated with the progressive Chinese feminism of the May Fourth Movement—Western education, women's suffrage, and anti-concubinage—but, like the catachresis *funü* itself, she experiences a transformation during wartime. After the Republican government relocates its capital inland under Chiang Kai-shek and her husband, an official in the KMT, is killed in a plane crash, she becomes more independent. By the end of the narrative, she has moved to the countryside to teach the farmers alongside Ch'iuming and Fengmo, who has returned from studying overseas. This is precisely the kind of praxis that Chinese Marxists conjectured *funü* would be capable of, and the Wu's oldest son, who is also the family merchant, confirms this when he gives his impression of the school: "'Rulan looks like a communist woman. It is all hateful to me'" (309). Unlike Madame Wu's son, who speaks for the landed gentry, Rulan has dedicated herself to the "common folk" and involved her sisters-in-law in the project. This third conception of "women" in the character of Rulan, especially her praxis toward the end of the novel, completes *Pavilion of Women*'s imaginary of "women."

III. Conclusion

The idea that words express concepts, which fail to capture the truth of any specific reality, is perhaps, not so recent and might be observed as far back as Platonic idealism. However, Barlow's examination of the way the catachresis "women" was employed by successive generations of Chinese feminists, draws our attention to the fact that, during periods of social change, certain concept-metaphors become destabilized—suddenly categories that had seemed settled are up for renegotiation. New concepts meant to change our understanding might be introduced and old terms might re-appropriated and given new meanings.

The Republican Era in China was a time of such social upheaval, allowing the concept women, which had been restricted to elite females in certain corners of the country, to be opened up to new interpretations. In *Pavilion of Women*, Madame Wu is witness to these changing conceptions of female gender, and ultimately it is her own transformation that constitutes the main dramatic arc of the novel.

However, Madame Wu's understanding of her own gender evolves in a more idiosyncratic way. For her, the category "women" is at first restricted to other elites, but her thinking shifts as a result of her contact with the other female characters and with the boundless wisdom and limitless tolerance of Brother André, who is mercifully killed by a roving gang of bandits before his saintliness takes over the novel. Interestingly, the result of these influences is that Madame Wu's understanding of herself comes to be a kind of rejection of gender itself. This transformation can be observed in the novel's metaphorical language, which initially emphasizes the solidity of her understanding of the patrilineal family and her role within it. Early in the novel, upon hearing the biblical Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders from a local missionary she thinks to herself: "A house built on sand? But she could never be so foolish. This house in which she lived had already stood for hundreds of years" (14). Madame Wu's knowledge of the construction of the book's titular pavilion parallels her understanding of her

patrilineal family; her understanding of what constitutes "men" and "women" and their respective roles in the metaphorical body of the household appears, initially, to be as solid and established as the slabs of rock that her psychical home rests upon. But, of course, one of the hallmarks of China during colonial modernity was the overturning of centuries-old social mores, especially in the dynastic and the domestic realms. In Madame Wu's case, her reading and exposure to her sons' wives erodes her certainty in the "order between men and women," and her increasingly unsettled imagination looks to realms outside her household: "For the first time in her life she longed to rise out of these four walls and travel everywhere upon the earth to see everything and to know all" (156, 180). Later, during her conversations with Brother André, "the walls of the courts where she had spent her whole life [recede]," and, after his death, when he has escaped "the walls of his priesthood," she is able to mentally "[break] down the walls of the compound" and convene with his spirit (122, 219, 309). The descriptions of Madame Wu figuratively making walls recede or breaking them down to arrive at her emancipation, which she achieves by imagining the late Brother André as a disembodied voice who counsels her, is likely part of what drove Peter Conn to write that, toward the end, the novel "declines into a mystical haze" (303). This is a fair criticism, but, looking beyond the somewhat cliché language, the narrative uses Madame Wu's transformation to present a critique of gender:

> Once, when André had sat in the chair across from hers, she had said to him, "Is man all man and is woman all woman? If so, they can never come together..."
>
> André had answered gravely enough, "God gave us each a residue for our own; that is, a part simply human, and neither male nor female. It is called the soul. It is unchanging and unchangeable..."
>
> "But a woman's brain is not the same as a man's?" she had asked.
>
> "It is the same only when it is freed from the needs of the flesh... the brain is a tool, and it may be put to any use that the creature

wishes…" (249-50)

Here, we see here a theory of gender that emphasizes the constructed nature of categories such as "men" and "women," and the mental equality of all subjects. This formulation suggests an appreciation of gender as a product of culture, which is not so different from contemporary understandings of gender. Appearing in a novel three years before the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the idea that "the brain is a tool" which can be used for the performance of gendered duties or not, is fairly radical for its time. Writing in 1946, Buck could hardly have predicted the course the emergent People's Republic of China would take, nor could she have foreseen the aftermath that followed the demise of Maoism in 1976, when questions were raised about the "success of the socialist revolution in elevating women to an equal economic and psychological footing with men" (Ko 3). But what Buck's portrait does capture is a moment when the tumultuous evolution of Chinese feminist thought might be observed within the generations contained by a single household—in which Confucian women, sexually assertive Westernized *nüxing*, and the female subject who would be the building block of the coming communist state, all lived side-by-side.

This imaginary is interesting because it emphasizes the chaotic and unfinished nature of Chinese feminism, in which the very idea of "women" as gender has been renegotiated to suit successive eras. As Barlow tells us, an important aspect of Chinese feminist thought is "its persistence in the face of discontinuity and disruption," and, how, in "discontinuous accumulation that returned the question of women's emancipation to the national agenda decade after decade lie the traces of enlightened optimism, diminished over the century but never fully defeated" (38). *Pavilion of Women* is a text that, when read alongside the works of Chinese writers such as Lu Xun and Ding Ling, can help us think about the way social upheaval led to a proliferation of conceptions of "women" in China during the first half of the twentieth century—those turbulent decades which did so much to set the world on its current course.

Notes

1 Including Liu Haiping, Xi Lian, Kang Liao, and Haipeng Zhou.

2 Nora Stirling's *Pearl Buck: A Woman in Conflict* (1985), Kang Liao's *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge Across the Pacific* (1997), and Conn's biography fit this description.

3 This evident in the title of Buck's first novel, which was changed by her publisher from *Winds of Heaven* to the more unambiguous *East Wind, West Wind* (*Cultural Biography* 112).

4 Buck does not explicitly name the novel's setting, but from textual clues we can deduce that it takes place during China's second conflict with the "East Ocean" people (*Pavilion* 301).

5 In employing catachresis, Barlow acknowledges the insights of scholars like Joan Scott and Judith Butler, who wrote: "Gender [is]… the very apparatus of production by which the sexes themselves are established" (7).

6 Barlow writes: "Colonial modernity is a term I have coined to help me rethink the conditions and the features of enlightened thought in Chinese intellectual circles after the monarchy ended in 1911... [Modernity] and colonial or imperialist projects are in material fact inextricable." (7).

7 The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was followed by the Qing dynasty, which collapsed in 1911.

8 The neologism nüxing displaced funü in the 1920s. Pavilion of Women opens in the late-1930s, but the isolation of the Wu family in Anhui province accounts for the lag in Madame Wu's approach to gender (e.g. her selecting a concubine for her husband).

9 Although in modern, colloquial Chinese *nüxing* is the normative term for women, in the early twentieth century it was a neologism, produced by combing the character for unmarried woman, *nü*, and the character for sex, *xing* (Barlow 78, 84).

10 Shanghai had been occupied by the British during the First Opium War and was designated as a treaty port in the 1842 Treaty of Nanking (Hsu 190).

11 Xiang, sometimes called the godmother of the revolution, was the first director of the Communist Party Women's Bureau (McElderry 577-79).

12 The Long March (1934-1935) was followed by the Second United Front (1937-41), a period that saw the increasing prominence of Maoist thought as the party tried to replace the culture of the May Fourth Movement with a more directly Communist culture (Hsu 561-6).

13 The May Fourth Movement began in 1919, when students in Beijing gathered to protest the Treaty of Versailles. In *Holding Up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past,*

Present, and Future, Lu Meiyi writes: "[The] May Fourth movement had two clear themes: anti-imperialist patriotism, and democracy and science" (63, 65).

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